## Supporting Topic Sentences

Most people know Mahatma Gandhi as one of the great leaders in history. Here are three details you might not know about him:

1. He walked barefoot everywhere he went, so the soles of his feet were thick and hard.
2. A very religious man, he frequently fasted. As a result, he was very thin and frail.
3. He had very bad breath.

To sum up all these “facts” about Gandhi, you might say he was a ***super-calloused fragile mystic plagued with halitosis***.

The above joke is pure fiction, of course. In a joke, you can get away with making up the facts, but in an essay you need solid evidence that will persuade your reader. As you write your essay, think like a lawyer preparing a case that will be argued before a jury. To persuade a jury that a client is not guilty, a lawyer must have specific, persuasive evidence—and plenty of it.

Three specific types of evidence will help you make your case:

1. **examples.** As you write any essay, these three words should be uppermost in your mind: **Give an example!** Examples help your reader visualize what you are saying.

For example, suppose that you write, “My home town is so boring.” You should follow up this general statement with an example so that your reader can see what you mean by “boring.” You might write, “The streets stand empty even in the middle of the day, and young people wander the sidewalks looking for something to do.”

1. **facts and statistics.** Like examples, facts and statistics help your reader to see your point more clearly. They help to persuade your reader that what you are saying is valid.

For example, suppose you tell a friend that your father was a great athlete when he was in high school. Backing up this general statement with a fact or statistic will help your friend understand what you mean by “great.” You might state a fact: “My father lettered in football, basketball, and track,” or, “My father was a state champion in the long jump and 100-yard dash.” You could also use statistics: “My father lettered in three different sports in all four years of high school,” or, “My father ran a 4:05 mile and won the state batting championship three times, with a .405 batting average.”

1. **quotations.** Using quotations from experts or other knowledgeable sources can make your writing sound more authoritative. It lets your reader know that you took the time and effort to educate yourself on the topic.

For example, suppose you are writing about an abstract idea like courage. You can make the subject more concrete by using an insightful quotation:

Winston Churchill said, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak;

courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

Examples, quotations, facts, and statistics are not mutually exclusive. For instance, you might use a quotation as an example, or you might use a quotation with a statistic in it. The important thing is that you have specific details and evidence to back up your points.

Three specific pieces of evidence per point is a good rule of thumb. You won’t always be able to manage three, but use that as your goal.

## Examples Need Three Qualities

If you have an important point to make, don’t try to be subtle or clever.

Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back, and hit it again.

Then hit it a third time with a tremendous whack.

~Winston Churchill

When writing an essay, you should have plenty of examples that illustrate and support your topic sentences. However, the examples should have three important qualities:

1. **they should be relevant.** Because the purpose of examples is to prove your point, they should be relevant. In other words, they should relate directly to your topic sentence.

For example, if you are arguing that television is important because it provides the public with important governmental information, don’t use infomercials as an example. Infomercials have nothing to do with governmental information. Instead, you might mention the weekly city council meetings televised on a public access station.

1. **They should be specific**. Use specific details in your examples, such as names, dates, and places. For example, if you are writing about leadership, you might use Napoleon as an example. If you are writing about natural disasters, you might use Hurricane Katrina in 2006 as a specific example. If you are writing about good luck charms, you might mention horseshoes, rabbits’ feet, and four-leaf clovers as specific examples.
2. **They should be varied**. Use a variety of examples. For instance, if you are writing about courage, you might use an historical example and an example from literature or current events. You could also use an example from your personal observation or experience. A variety of examples will help keep your reader interested.

Circle the examples below that are relevant to the **topic sentence**: William Shakespeare is the most influential writer in the English language because of his amazing use of words.

1. He made up over 1,700 new words.
2. He was born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1564.
3. His words and phrases are quoted in written and spoken English more than any other single writer’s.
4. No one knows exactly when and how Shakespeare died.
5. He married a woman named Anne Hathaway when he was 18.

One of the examples below does not support the topic sentence because it is not specific. Circle the sentence that is not specific to this **topic sentence**: Young people don’t read newspapers because there is too much competition from television and computers.

1. Because there has been such an amazing growth in entertainment options over the past ten years, young people choose to sit in front of their computers or their televisions rather than read newspapers.
2. Sixty-eight percent of children 8 to 18 have televisions in their rooms, and 33 percent have computers. This same group spends an average of six hours and 21 minutes a day with electronic media but just 43 minutes with print media.
3. Mary Jackson, the mother of two teenage boys and one teenage girl, commented, “My kids and all their friends never touch a newspaper. All their free time is spent watching television, listening to CDs, or playing games on their PlayStation.”

Look at the two paragraph outlines below. Which outline has the most varied examples? Why?

# Outline 1

**Topic Sentence:** The courage to stand up to a crowd is one trait that makes great leaders.

Example 1: Atticus, in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, stands up to a lynch mob.

Example 2: Rosa Parks stood against prejudice by refusing to move to the back of the bus.

Example 3: My grandfather stood up for his friend during the Civil Rights movement.

# Outline 2

**Topic Sentence:**  The courage to stand up to a crowd is one trait that makes great leaders.

Example 1: Ronald Reagan stood up to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Example 2: John F. Kennedy stood up to the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Example 3: George Washington stood up against England during the American Revolution.

## Three Things to Include in a Quotation

If you use quotations to support your topic sentences, be sure to integrate them smoothly into your paper. Don’t make the mistake of padding your paper with too many quotations or simply tacking them into your paper without any explanation.

Integrate quotations into your paper by including these three things:

1. **A transition**. A transitional word or phrase, such as “for example,” “according to,” or “as stated by” lets the reader know that a quote is coming.
2. **A lead-in**. A lead-in identifies the speaker and his or her title or qualifications. It tells the reader something about the credibility of your source. (If the source is not a person, the lead-in should give the name of the group or organization responsible.)
3. **a parenthetical reference**. A parenthetical reference tells the reader, in parentheses, the author’s name and the page number where you found the quotation. A Works Cited page at the end of your paper will give the rest of the information—for example, the name of the book, the publisher, the date of publication, etc.

Below is an example of a quotation that has all three of the elements above. It is taken from an essay that argues the importance of memorizing and reciting prose and poetry.

Therefore, Donald Hall, author of “Bring Back the Out-Loud Culture” says that through memorization and recitation, the student “will discover drama, humor, passion, and intelligence in print” (Hall 12).

The quotation uses a transition: **Therefore**. It has a lead-in identifying the speaker: Donald Hall, author of an article titled “Bring Back the Out-Loud Culture.” It includes a parenthetical reference telling the source of the quote: (Hall 12).

Sometimes you may want to quote someone but not use all of his or her words. To leave out a part of the quote, use an ellipsis instead of the words you are leaving out. To make an ellipsis, type three periods (…).

**Quote with an ellipsis**

According to Mark Fenton, editor of the Boston-based *Walking Magazine*, the benefits of walking are immense: “We see again and again that regular exercise gives an improved sense of self-worth and an improved sense of purpose…It’s also clear that regular activity may reduce the likelihood of clinical depression” (Walking as a Way of Life).

**To add material to a quote to clarify its meaning, put brackets ([ ]) around any words that you add**.

**Quote with brackets**

U.S. Congresswoman Susan A. Davis praises Tony, saying “[He] is living proof that if you work hard you can achieve almost anything” (Davis).

When using quotations, writers should understand the difference between a direct quote and an indirect quote, as well as the difference between a long quote and a short quote.

**Direct Quotes and Indirect Quotes**. A direct quote uses someone’s **exact** words, with quotation marks. An indirect quote tells what someone said without using the exact words. No quotation marks are used with an indirect quote.

Here are some examples of direct and indirect quotes. Notice that both examples identify the original source of the quotation. (More detailed information would be in the Works Cited page at the end of the essay.)

**Direct Quote**

For example, according to Anjetta McQueen, an education writer, “About 36% of high school graduates do not go straight to college even though a college graduate’s earning power over a lifetime is nearly twice that of a high school graduate” (McQueen 4).

**Indirect Quote**

For example, according to Anjetta McQueen, an education writer, although the economic benefits of college seem obvious, about one third of graduates of high school do not enroll in college (McQueen 4).

**Short Quotes and Long Quotes**

A short quote is four lines or fewer in length. It is punctuated with quotation marks. A long quote is five lines or more in length. It uses indentation instead of quotation marks to indicate that it is a quote. For example:

The poet Donald Hall argues that reading aloud and recitation are vital components for building fluent readers:

If when we read silently we do not hear a text, we slide past words passively, without making decisions, without knowing or caring…We might as well be watching haircuts or “Conan the Barbarian.” In the old Out-Loud Culture, print was always potential speech; even silent readers, too shy to read aloud, inwardly heard the sound of words. Their culture identified print and voice. Everyone’s ability to read was enhanced by recitation. Then we read aggressively; then we demanded sense. (Hall 12)

Besides the fact that there are no quotation marks, what other difference do you notice about the way this parenthetical citation is punctuated?

## Practice with Quotations

Read the essay about the poem “The Bitter River” and do the following:

1. Label each direct quote as “DQ” and each indirect quote as “IQ.”
2. Underline the lead-ins before each quote.